DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 998 HE 014 614

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TITLE American Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Students Before and During an International Crisis.
INSTITUTION Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Office for Student Affairs.
PUB DATE 1 Aug 80
NOTE 20p.
AVAILABLE FROM University of Minnesota, Office for Student Affairs, Minneapolis, MN.
JOURNAL CIT OSA Research Bulletin; v21 n1 Aug 1980.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Conflict; Followup Studies; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Intergroup Relations; International Educational Exchange; *International Relations; Interpersonal Relationship; *Political Influences; Questionnaires; *Social Integration; Social Isolation; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; Student Exchange Programs
IDENTIFIERS Iran

ABSTRACT

Attitudes of a random sample of students at a large university toward foreign students and international programs were surveyed before and after the seizure of U.S. hostages in Iran. A newly developed "International Issues Questionnaire" covered attitudes toward foreign students as teaching assistants, funding exchange programs with student fees, and attitudes regarding international relations issues. Students were asked about their contact with foreign students, their experiences with other cultures, and their demographic characteristics. In the spring of 1979, 743 students responded to the mail questionnaire, and six months later, 404 students responded to the followup survey. In contrast to a majority view of the value and desirability of interaction with foreign students, less than one-third of respondents on both surveys agreed that there was meaningful contact between U.S. students and foreign students at the university. Most students did not change their attitudes toward foreign students after the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Iran, but their responses did show increased support for funding international exchange programs. Attitudes toward foreign students were significantly related to respondents' demographic characteristics, political views, and the frequency and form of their contact with foreign students. More positive attitudes toward foreign students were associated with being female, older, enrolled in graduate school, living off campus, and having travelled abroad. The more frequent the students' reported contact with foreign students, the more positive were their attitudes. A bibliography and questionnaire are appended. (SW)

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OSA Research Bulletin
Office for Student Affairs
University of Minnesota
Volume 21
Number 1
Date 8/1/80

OSA

ED210998

American Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Students Before and During an International Crisis

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Abstract

A random sample of domestic students at a large university were surveyed on their attitudes toward foreign students and international programs before and after the seizure of U.S. hostages in Iran. Key findings were: Most students did not change their attitudes toward foreign students after the embassy takeover, but their responses did show increased support for funding international exchange programs. Attitudes toward foreign students were significantly related to respondents' demographic characteristics, political views, and the frequency and form of their contacts with foreign students.

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American Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Students Before and During an International Crisis

Since World War II the United States has actively encouraged the enrollment of foreign students in American colleges and universities. In the 1970s alone, the number of foreign students rose dramatically, increasing from 117,000 in 1970 to 264,000 in 1979 (Institute of International Education, 1980). This number includes only those foreign citizens who reside in the United States holding visas issued for the purpose of study and training. In addition, there is a large but unknown number of students who are present in an immigrant visa status but who are, nevertheless, socially defined as foreign students.

The desire to include foreign students in American higher education can be traced to a variety of factors ranging from idealistic desires for international goodwill to pragmatic concerns of foreign policy and falling institutional enrollments (Hayden, 1978; Mestenhauser, 1976; President's Commission Report, 1979; Paige, 1978). One result of their presence on many campuses is that the academic community is now far more heterogeneous culturally, socially, linguistically and economically than ever before.

While official policy has been positive toward foreign students, it is not clear to what degree this positive stance has been shared by individual Americans on and off university campuses. Several studies of foreign student adjustment have noted problems in their relations with American students (Spaulding & Flack, 1976; Skinner & Hendricks, 1977; Lee, Abd-Ella, & Burks, 1980). In surveys of American student attitudes at two large universities, the majority of students endorsed the presence of foreign students on campus, but also commented on the difficulty of establishing communications with them and on the perceived isolation of the two groups from each other (Barnhart, 1973; Fiedler, 1975). During the 1979-80 academic year, a year characterized by

severe pressures on America's foreign policy, conflict between American and foreign students occurred on a number of campuses.

The presence of foreign students raises a number of issues having both theoretical and practical significance. As foreign students become more visible, are American student attitudes likely to shift? What are the effects of external international events (e.g., the Iranian crisis, the influx of Indochinese refugees) on American student attitudes toward foreign students and international education? What are the factors which promote positive relations between U. S. and foreign students?

The present study was designed to address some of these issues. It was occasioned by the desire of a large midwestern university with a sizable foreign student population to generate baseline data on American student attitudes toward foreign students and international education. Such data would be used in the development of programs and policy. Of interest were three possible explanations of attitudes toward foreign students. The first is the "contact hypothesis"—the hypothesis that the extent and form of contacts among persons of different cultures are related to their attitudes toward one another. The second hypothesis is the "trait-factor hypothesis," which suggests that attitudes are primarily a function of demographic variables such as sex and age or other attitudinal variables such as liberalism-conservatism. The third hypothesis is the "social catastrophe hypothesis" (Taylor, 1980), which would suggest that attitudes are greatly influenced by major political and social events. The major event in this case was the seizure of the American embassy in Teheran. Given that the Iranian militants holding the hostages were continually referred to as "students," it was considered possible that the negative attitudes held by many Americans toward these militants might generalize to Iranian and other foreign students in the U. S.

The possibility of examining the social catastrophe hypothesis in this context occurred because of the timing of the study. Attitudes toward foreign students were initially assessed in May and June of 1979, five months prior to the embassy takeover. Following the seizure of the hostages, the American students who responded to the first survey and who were still attending the university were resurveyed. This second survey took place in January and February of 1980, when the hostages were still being held, but before the aborted American rescue attempt.

In summary, the study reported here sought to examine in more depth than previous studies, the dimensions and correlates of domestic students' attitudes toward foreign students.

Method

Initial Survey

An International Issues Questionnaire was designed by the authors during early 1979. Questions addressed American student attitudes toward foreign students, international educational programs, foreign students as teaching assistants, funding exchange programs with student fees, and attitudes regarding international relations issues. Additionally, students were asked about their contact with foreign students, their experiences with other cultures and their demographic characteristics. The questions were generated with the assistance of the foreign student advising staff at the university. The final 4-page questionnaire was distributed in May 1979, after successive drafts had been reviewed and pilot tested.

A random sample of 973 undergraduate and graduate students drawn from the domestic student population was mailed questionnaires, and four follow-up reminders. Responses received from 75% of the students (N=743).

Follow-up Survey

The second phase of the study six months later questioned those individuals who responded to the first survey and who were registered for classes during the Fall 1979 term. In early 1980 the 473 students who met these criteria were sent a follow-up questionnaire which repeated ten items assessing attitudes toward foreign students, a single rating of the overall contribution of foreign students to the university, and four items asking about funding student exchange programs. It also included five new items on current opinions regarding the Iranian situation, as well as how the individual's opinions had changed. The response rate to this follow-up survey was 85% (N=404).

The participants in the follow-up study were highly similar to the total group of respondents to the first questionnaire in terms of key demographic characteristics. In both samples 56% were male. Half were in the schools of liberal arts and education, and 22% and 23% respectively were enrolled in graduate and professional schools, with the remainder in other undergraduate colleges. Those who responded to the follow-up were somewhat younger than were the respondents to the first questionnaire. Fifty-eight percent of the original group and 64% of the follow-up respondents were age 23 or under at the time of the first survey.

Data Analysis

Included in this report are responses to items on both surveys as well as to five new items on the resurvey. Ten of these items asked students to rate strength of agreement or disagreement with statements about foreign students. These items were unit-weighted to form a summated scale. Internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for this scale were .77 for the 743 initial responses, and .78 for the 404 follow-up responses.

Changes between the first and second surveys were assessed with chi-square

tests for multi-category correlated proportions (McNemar, 1955). Subgroup differences in initial attitudes toward foreign students among the 743 original respondents were assessed by one-way analyses of variance on the scale scores and by cross tabulations of individual items.

Results

Changes in Attitudes

Table 1 shows the initial (t_1) and follow-up (t_2) responses of the 404 persons who responded to both questionnaires. The initial responses of the full set of 743 are not shown because chi-square and t-tests showed no significant differences in initial item and scale responses between those who responded to the follow-up and the larger group.

Insert Table 1 about here

On both surveys, the strongest agreement was with items that concerned international exchange and contact at an abstract or ideal level. Majorities agreed that many American students have negative stereotypes about foreign students (74% initially and 76% at follow-up), that they personally enjoyed meeting foreign students (66% and 70%), and that American students should make an effort to learn from foreign students about their customs (57% and 61%).

In contrast to their views of the value and the desirability of interaction with foreign students, neither their own behavior nor their perception of the behavior of other students was consistent with such a view. While 64% said they had a foreign student as a casual friend, only 16% reported a close friendship with a foreign student. On both surveys, less than one-third (30% and 28%) agreed that there was meaningful contact between U. S. students and foreign students at the university.

Consonant with their judgments about the lack of contact between domestic and foreign students were respondents' assessments of the contribution of foreign students to educational experiences at the university. Few students on either survey (14% and 15%) agreed that foreign students had contributed a lot to their own education. However, at a more general level, the percentage who said that the contribution of foreign students to education at the university was valuable or very valuable was 37% at the first administration and 30% at the second administration.

Most respondents accepted the legitimacy of foreign students' expressing their political views. At both administrations of the questionnaire, majorities (56% and 60%) disagreed with the contention that foreign students should not be allowed to demonstrate in public on issues concerning their country, while about one-fifth (18% and 21%) agreed with this statement. Even though support of the right of foreign students to demonstrate did not change during the crisis months, significant ($p<.05$) changes were found on two other items relating to students' political activity. The percentage who said that they found many foreign students too critical of the U. S. rose from 21% to 30%, and the percentage who said that foreign students are often too emotionally involved in the problems of their country to discuss them rationally rose from 16% to 29%. On all ten items on the scale of attitudes toward foreign students, there was a reduction between the two administrations in the percentage who gave a "neutral" response. Most of those "neutral" respondents who shifted positions evidently did so in the direction of criticism of foreign students.

The largest changes between the first and second administrations of the questionnaire, all significant beyond the .01 level, were for questions about whether student fees should be used to support various international programs. The percentage advocating support for counseling and services for students

planning to travel and study abroad rose from 52% to 66%. The percentage willing to pay for reciprocal student exchange programs with previously isolated countries rose from 49% to 60%. Scholarships for American and foreign students, which received proportionately less initial support than did the other programs, also showed substantial gains in support on the second survey. Support for scholarships for U. S. students to study abroad rose from 41% to 55%, and support for scholarships for students from poor countries rose from 33% to 44%.

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents said that their attitudes toward the role of foreign students had changed since the first survey, and 73% said they had not. Of the persons who said that their views had changed, 43% said negative or mixed things about foreign students in general, and 17% said negative things about Iranian students in particular. Twenty percent of those reporting changed attitudes became more favorable toward foreign students, and the final 20% of those changing did not explain how their attitudes had shifted.

Self-perceived change was significantly ($p<.01$) related to age, college, residence, and attitude toward foreign aid. The percentage who reported changing was inversely related to age, with 66% of those under 21 saying their views toward foreign students had changed, compared to 34% of those 21-23, 15% of those 24-26, and 12% of those 27 or older. The percentage of self-perceived changes was greatest among agriculture/forestry students (39%) and liberal arts, business, education, and law students (32%); and lowest among graduate students (9%). Among those who said they were living on campus at the time of the first survey, there was a greater percentage of perceived changes (43% in residence halls and 53% in fraternities/sororities) than among those who were living off campus (23%). Finally, more (38%) of those who believed that foreign aid to developing nations is currently excessive changed than did those who said that the aid was sufficient (27%) or not enough (18%).

On the follow-up items specific to the Iranian situation, respondents showed little inclination to single out Iranian students in the U. S. as targets for anger engendered by the hostage situation. Nearly three-quarters (73%) agreed that Iranian students should not be punished for the actions of persons in Iran. Also, less than one-third (29%) agreed that Iranian students should be expelled if the American hostages are not released within a reasonable period of time.

Correlates of Attitudes Toward Foreign Students

Table 2 summarizes the significant ($p<.01$) differences between student subgroups in their attitudes toward foreign students, as assessed by analyses of variance of the scale of attitudes toward foreign students. More positive attitudes toward foreign students were associated with being female, older, enrolled in graduate school, living off campus, and having travelled abroad.

Insert Table 2 about here

Both the frequency and type of contact with foreign students were related to attitudes toward them. The more frequent the students' reported contact with foreign students, the more positive were their attitudes. A stronger association with attitudes toward foreign students came from the question of whether respondents had known a foreign student as a casual friend, close friend or teaching assistant. Respondents were most positive when they had had a foreign student only as a casual or close friend, and least positive when they had known foreign students as teaching assistants and not as friends.

Similarly, those who said that having a foreign teaching assistant in a course had harmed the quality of their course were more negative toward foreign students than were those who said that having a teaching assistant helped or had

no effect on course quality. Attitudes toward foreign students were also related to views of foreign aid and to liberalism/conservatism. Those who believed that current foreign aid to developing nations is excessive were more negative toward foreign students than were those who believed that foreign aid is adequate or insufficient. Those who characterized their political beliefs as conservative were more negative than those who said they were liberal.

Discussion

The picture of social relations provided by domestic students' attitudes and experiences with foreign students suggests that contact of a meaningful and sustained nature between the two populations remains minimal. While most students reported a foreign student as a casual friend, few had one as a close friend. Although the surveyed American students indicated an openness to future contact with foreign students and supported the ideal of intercultural understanding, less than one-third said that there was meaningful contact with foreign students at the university or that foreign students had made a "valuable" or "very valuable" contribution to their own educational experience.

Some students blamed foreign students for the perceived lack of contact. More than one-third agreed that foreign students isolate themselves and are hard to get to know. "I used to think they were interesting. Now I have become a bit frustrated with their general narrowmindedness and anti-social behavior. I know I'm generalizing—but this is how I feel from the experiences I've had with foreigners." Others noted their own role in the situation. "I like the cosmopolitan atmosphere that foreign students bring to the campus. I feel that I haven't made friendships with foreign students as much because of reticence on my part as on theirs." At the same time, most agreed that Americans should make an effort to meet foreign students and learn from them. "Foreign students have now, in a sense, become the mediators of our relations with people of

different countries. They know about what really goes on in a population, not what the government portrays... They are also indicators for us to gain insight into which way they feel our country measures up to standards."

The finding that frequency of contact and close friendship with foreign students relate to positive attitudes is consistent with the results of numerous earlier studies (Morris, 1960; Selltiz, Christ, Havel, & Cook, 1963; Sewell & Davidson, 1961) and supports the contact hypothesis. But the generally negative relationship between student attitudes toward foreign students and having had a foreign student as an instructor is a finding which has not previously been reported and is not easy to interpret. It is possible that informal contact, as in the case of friendship, promotes a positive attitude. However, where the contact is limited to the teacher-student relationship, American students are more likely to know foreign students only in a formal sense. Moreover, such a relationship is not based on an arrangement of equal status. This is noteworthy because the literature (Allport, 1958; Riordan, 1978) indicates that inter-cultural relationships are more positive in an equal status context. Thus, the formal, unequal status characteristics of the American student-foreign teaching assistant roles are contrary to the conditions of contact which promote positive relationships.

The findings also support a trait factor view in that significant age and sex differences were found. Older students were more positive than were younger students toward their foreign student counterparts. One explanation may be the often noted observation that younger persons in American society are becoming more conservative. It is also possible that university life promotes more positive attitudes by providing opportunities for intercultural contacts. Assuming these contact opportunities are equally available to men and women, it is not clear why female students possess more positive attitudes. It remains

for future studies to pursue this issue.

The time between the first survey and the follow-up served to accentuate initial trends in student opinion. Students became slightly more negative about current relationships with foreign students, but they also became more positive about the idea of intercultural exchange. In particular, there was significantly increased support for funding programs focused on promoting international and intercultural education.

In other respects, the "social catastrophe" of the Iranian crisis appeared not to have had a large impact. Students did not become dramatically xenophobic. Their attitudes toward those holding the hostages in Iran did not generalize to all foreign students in general, or even to Iranian students in this country. The majority believed that Iranian students in the U. S. should not be punished for the actions of the Iranian militants. To be sure, a certain number did say they changed their views of Iranians and foreign students as a whole. These persons, who tended to be younger and live on campus, were perhaps more likely than others to be influenced by campus demonstrations and discussions. For many the Iranian crisis probably did not change their views toward foreign students, but may have sensitized them to the issues involved. This was indicated by the consistent reduction in the percentage of "neutral" responses on the follow-up. An explicit statement of this phenomenon was offered by one respondent: "I think the substance of my attitudes is the same but the issue is more pronounced in my life due to the Iranian crisis and my attitudes are a bit stronger."

Two qualifications of the study findings should be noted. The study surveyed midwestern students at a large urban campus who might not be representative of U. S. students in general. The Iranian crisis continued past the time of the second survey. Unexpected opinion shifts may have subsequently occurred.

Nevertheless the data have implications for the development of means for promoting intercultural and international understanding on campus. The first area for these implications is in the preparation of foreign students as teaching assistants. Having had a foreign teaching assistant was clearly a negative experience for a number of the domestic students responding to the study. Illustrative of their views was, "Foreign TAs should be able to communicate in English well enough for a class to follow his/her instructions. I have had many foreign TAs who were exceptionally knowledgeable but they were unable to teach me what they knew. TAs like this give foreigners a bad reputation." We note these reactions, not to validate their correctness, but rather to point up the prevalence of such perceptions and their consequence. Efforts to diagnose and correct the problems that domestic students perceive themselves as having with foreign TAs would seem to be in order, not only to improve learning, but also to improve relationships with foreign students.

The second area of implications is for international exchange and intercultural programs. Since friendship with foreign students is a positive factor in attitudes toward them, the promotion of friendly contacts would also seem to be an effective way of fostering goodwill toward foreign students and ultimately their adjustment to American academic life. As one respondent put it, "I think that events of the past months (basically, but not limited to Iran) have shown me the need to make students aware of reciprocal student exchange programs... The U. S. is a country of immigrants from the start, and lack of education on both sides has led to current events."

The fact that most respondents said that they enjoy meeting foreign students and learning from them does not mean that this attitude has been translated into friendly and open behavior. The perceived lack of meaningful contact between domestic and foreign students suggests that there are obstacles to

effective communication between the two groups. Future research might well concentrate on understanding such obstacles and on ways to remove them.

The relationship between attitudes toward aid to developing nations and attitudes toward foreign students is also suggestive. How an individual reacts to foreign students may be a function of his/her worldmindedness. Those who conceive of the United States as a contributing member of a world community are probably more receptive to foreign students than those who hold isolationist views. If coursework and programs dealing with international issues promote an internationalist perspective, then they may also result in a more positive view of foreign students. The findings may also mean that a certain segment of the student population is ideologically predisposed to be negative toward international exchanges and resistant to efforts in international education.

Table 1[abc]

Percentage Distribution of Initial (t_1) and Follow-up (t_2) Attitudes Toward Foreign Students and Programs (N=404)

		SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. Many Americans have negative stereotypes about foreign students.....	t_1	18	56	19	7	1
	t_2	21	55	18	6	1
2. I enjoy meeting foreign students and learning about their countries and cultures.....	t_1	19	47	28	5	2
	t_2	21	49	23	5	2
3. American students should make an effort to learn from foreign students about their customs.....	t_1	16	41	31	9	3
	t_2	13	48	29	8	2
4. In my experience, foreign students tend to isolate themselves from American students and are hard to get to know.....	t_1	9	28	36	25	3
	t_2	8	29	35	28	1
5. I find that many foreign students are too critical of the U. S.*.....	t_1	6	15	51	24	4
	t_2	8	22	42	25	3
6. There is meaningful contact between U. S. and foreign students at the University....	t_1	3	27	49	18	3
	t_2	2	26	47	22	4
7. It has been easy for me to initiate contacts with foreign students.....	t_1	5	26	43	21	4
	t_2	5	29	34	28	5
8. Foreign students are often too emotionally involved the problems of their countries to discuss them rationally and objectively*...	t_1	2	14	46	32	7
	t_2	4	25	36	29	7
9. Foreign students have contributed a lot to my education here at the University.....	t_1	2	12	34	34	18
	t_2	3	12	26	39	20
10. Foreign students should not be allowed to demonstrate in public on issues concerning their countries.....	t_1	7	11	26	35	21
	t_2	8	13	20	40	20
11. Iranian students in the U. S. should not be punished for the activities of persons in Iran.	t_2	30	43	16	7	4
12. The Shah of Iran should be tried by an international tribunal.....	t_2	14	26	54	18	9
13. Iranian students should be expelled from the U. S. if the American hostages are not released within a reasonable period of time..	t_2	13	16	18	35	18

		t_1	t_2
14. Overall, how valuable do you think the contribution of foreign students is to the educational experience at the University?	Very valuable	10	10
	Valuable	27	20
	Of some value	38	41
	Of little value	20	21
	Of no value	5	9

Should student fee money be used for:		Yes	No	Don't know
15. Counseling and services for students planning to travel and study abroad?**.....	t_1	52	36	12
	t_2	66	26	9
16. Reciprocal student exchange programs with countries which we have had very little contact with in the past (People's Republic of China, Cuba, etc.)?**.	t_1	49	32	19
	t_2	60	26	14
17. Scholarships for U. S. students to study abroad?**.....	t_1	41	47	12
	t_2	55	37	7
18. Students from the poorest countries (those with low per capita income)?**.....	t_1	33	49	17
	t_2	44	43	13

[a](Strongly agree=SA; Agree=A; Neutral=N; Disagree=D; Strongly disagree=SD)
[b]* P<.05 ** P<.01
[c]Responses may sum to 101% or 99% due to rounding

Table 2
Variables Significantly Related to Attitudes
Toward Foreign Students
(N=743)

Background	F	Eta
Age.....	15.6	.25
Residence.....	12.6	.22
College.....	3.8	.16
Sex.....	12.0	.12
Contact		
Contact as TA vs. friend.....	40.9	.38
Frequency of contact.....	22.3	.28
Time spent travelling abroad.....	4.7	.17
Attitudes		
Opinion of foreign aid.....	56.0	.36
Opinion of foreign TAs effect on courses..	28.5	.32
Liberalism/conservatism.....	16.8	.27

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